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AUTHOR Moore, Dinty W.
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ABSTRACT

A short story assignment incorporates creative writing into the syllabus of a freshman composition class, while erasing the misconception that creative writing is something a "regular" student cannot do. Students write a rough draft both of a personal experience essay and of a short story. Based on peer-reviews of both, students choose one of the rough drafts to revise, and this revised paper represents their grade for the unit. Both rough drafts must be handed in with the revised paper--thus, the short story is not optional, yet students who are not comfortable with writing short fiction do not feel penalized in the grade book. Students are encouraged to write "short" short stories (1,000 to 1,500 words), and the use of shorter short stories as class readings helps to encourage this. Students' use of detail and vivid language improves, both in their fiction and nonfiction writing. (SR)

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# NARRATIVE IS JUST A FANCY WORD FOR STORY

## Incorporating A Short Fiction Assignment Into the Freshman Composition Syllabus

Dinty W. Moore
Pennsylvania State University

On the first day of each semester, I ask my freshman composition students to complete a writing survey -- what they have written in the past, how they liked writing it. Often, as many as two-thirds list "creative writing" as their favorite type of writing. Many, when asked to list their own "best" writing to date, talk enthusiastically about a short story or poem they wrote some years earlier.

Given the inherent difficulty in generating interest in writing among college freshmen, it would seem to make sense that we take advantage of this existing bias. So, I have attempted to do just that -- by fitting short fiction into my freshman composition syllabus.

My talk today will focus on how I managed to incorporate 'creative writing' into the syllabus, and how this experiment works in my composition classroom.

First, let me say a word or two about why I think this addition is valid.

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Clarity is clarity, no matter what one is writing; and creative writing can be used quite effectively to teach the importance of such elements as word choice, sentence variety, paragraphing, use of detail, and audience. Moreover, introducing students to creative writing can show that imagination is common to all forms of writing.

Pulitzer Prize winner Wallace Stegner, a novelist and former composition instructor, was once asked to discuss the similarities between expository writing and fiction. "Expository writing," he said, "has to contain a body of information. But that body of information doesn't have to be blunt or obtuse. It doesn't hurt any writer of expository prose to try his hand at writing a story, because control of place and character and evocation of sensuous impressions and so on are all things that can be used in expository writing." [1]

But still, how do you teach creative writing? John Gardner, the late novelist, poet and writing teacher, wrote extensively on teaching. Gardner lists his own criteria for good fiction: "creation of a vivid and continuous dream, authorial generosity, intellectual and emotional significance, elegance and efficiency, and strangeness." [2]

Granted, such criteria would quickly intimidate the average freshman composition student, not to mention the professor. Instead, I looked at one of the few current composition textbooks to include a section on short fiction. This text, Writing in the

Liberal Arts Tradition, gives a simpler definition -- "the presentation, elaboration or complication, climax and resolution of a conflict through the use of interrelated details."[3]

Sound familiar?

For many, creative writing remains a mysterious, elusive form, but take a moment to consider the two-word label: short, story. "Short," of course, refers to length. And a "story" is just that. I have found that nearly every rule that applies to a good personal experience essay (e.g., use of "vivid detail," "sensory impressions," and "a clear point"), applies as well to a short piece of fiction. By the end of the unit, my students grow weary of me pointing out the similarities, but it does help to erase the misconception that creative writing is something a regular student cannot do.

I chose the short story form over poetry because fiction is the primary focus of my own writing. In addition, I think the prose aspect of fiction has more in common with the general essay. However, I am willing to believe that a poet could construct an equally compelling argument for incorporating poems into the syllabus.

**The Plan**

The method I used was quite simple. During the weeks I would normally focus on the personal experience essay, or narrative, I focus on both the essay and the short story. My students are instructed to write a rough draft of both forms, and

these are both peer-reviewed in class. Based on the peer-review comments, the students then choose one of their rough drafts to revise. This revised paper represents their grade for the unit.

In this way, students who feel less than comfortable with their ability to write short fiction -- "I simply have no imagination" -- do not feel penalized in the grade book.

I do not, however, make the short story optional; students aren't, for instance, excused from the "Making Proposals" paper because they find it difficult. Part of college should be the experience of doing things which are challenging and unfamiliar. I require that both rough drafts be handed in with the revised paper.

I encourage my students to stick to the short short story length for their first story -- 1,000 to 1,500 words, or four to six double-spaced, typed pages. I also encourage them to use no more than two, maybe three, characters. Beyond that, we do some reading, discuss "show vs. tell" at length, and work on the use of detail. It is rare for composition textbooks to include a creative writing unit, but certain sections of current texts -- for instance, standard chapters on Describing, Narrating, and Invention and Inquiry -- are quite applicable.

And, of course, I give them examples. For instance, William Carlos Williams, "The Use of Force;" James Thurber, "The Unicorn in the Garden;" Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "Bitterness for Three Sleepwalkers;" James Thurber, "If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox;" Katherine Anne Porter, "Magic;" Ernest Hemingway, "A

Clean, Well-Lighted Place;" Sherwood Anderson, "The Untold Lie;" Stephen Crane, "An Episode of War;" and Anton Chekhov, "After the Theatre." If the instructor has his or her own favorites, they would work too. However, I would again suggest that shorter short stories be used.

**How it Works**

When I try this in my own freshman composition class, my students are at first skeptical, but more than half eventually choose the short story as the paper they would revise for a grade. The stories themselves are often over-ambitious in their plotting -- the students want to fit a novel onto three pages -- so now I spend more time explaining economy of plot, encouraging my students to focus on the central incident within the longer storyline.

The fiction assignments are generally excellent in their use of sensory detail, dialogue and sentence variety. In fact, almost every student's use of detail and vivid language improves in the fictional mode. Moreover, I think the interaction of genres improves the students' non-fiction narratives -- they seem finally to understand that "narrative" is just a big word for "story."

Experienced writers, except when testifying in court, tend to "fudge" a little -- perhaps combining incidents that occurred on separate days -- to create a seamless, effective tale. Studying fiction and non-fiction simultaneously allows us to

explore the elusive line that separates the two forms. The combination also allows students to grasp the idea that the colorful sorts of description they see in fiction can be used just as appropriately in personal narratives. They have fun, too, and I think we all learn something.

I would encourage composition teachers to experiment and to find what works for them. The enthusiasm the students bring to this unit provides a great opportunity for teaching and for making a lasting impression.

## APPENDIX A
## SUGGESTED EXERCISES

To aid in finding a story idea:

-- Have the students write a paragraph describing a conflict over one of the following: money, work, authority, alcohol, tradition, sex or failure.

Briefly outline an opening, complication, climax and resolution for the situation above. (The instructor might choose one of the situations and do this on the board. Focus on choosing moments from the longer storyline that could make a good short, short.)

Write one paragraph of the story: the opening, moment of complication, climactic scene or resolution.

To aid in understanding how stories can be written:

-- Have the students write a paragraph that might appear in a short story right **before** the discovery of a body. Describe either the thoughts of the character about to discover the body, the area where the body will be found, or both. Do not describe the body.

-- Take a simple event: a female student walks out of class, collides with a male student, drops her books and realizes the guy she just ran into is very attractive. Have students write the scene in one page or less, using one of four different complications, but without at any point directly stating the complication. They might be: the female student needs a date for friday night; the female student has a disease that will probably kill her within the year; the male student is married but the female student doesn't know it; the male student has wanted to meet the female student for weeks but she doesn't know it. Compare how the scenes differ because of the hidden complication.

-- From John Gardner's <u>The Art of Fiction</u>: Describe a barn as seen by a man whose son was just killed in a war. Do not mention the son, the war or death. Describe the same barn as seen by a happy lover. Do not mention love or the loved one.

-- Similarly, have the students describe a sunny day through the eyes of someone who has just "aced" a test, and through the eyes of someone who has to go home and study for one. Do not mention the test.

1. Bunge, Nancy. Finding the Words: Conversations with Writers Who Teach. Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press. p. 122.

2. Gardner, John. On Becoming a Novelist. NY: Harper & Row, 1983. p. 80.

3. Kinneavy, James L., William McLeary, and Neil Nakadate. Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition: A Rhetoric with Readings. NY: Harper & Row, 1985. p. 221.